

How English learners can improve intonation

What is intonation and how can you improve this aspect of your pronunciation?

Imagine you are asking a cab driver if he will take you to a shopping centre five kilometres away. He replies – in the most chilling, low, flat voice you have ever heard – 'Sure. Get in'. Would you get in?

Now imagine there is another cab behind him. You ask the same question, only this time the driver replies with a cheery, almost musical, sound in his voice. Would you get in this time?

If you choose the second cab, it is probably because the driver's intonation has made you feel more welcome: 'Oh, he seems much nicer', you think to yourself.

But what is intonation, really? Is it merely sounding friendly or is there more to it?

What we mean by intonation

Intonation is a feature of pronunciation and common to all languages. Other features of pronunciation include stress, rhythm, connected speech and accent. As with these other features, intonation is about how we say something rather than what we say.

At its simplest, intonation could be described as 'the music of speech'. A change or variation in this music (or pitch) can affect the meaning of what we say.

We can therefore think of intonation as referring to the way we use the pitch of our voice to express particular meanings and attitudes.

Different functions of intonation in English

There are quite a few theories that attempt to explain what intonation does and how it is used in English. Let us take a look at two of its main functions:

Attitudinal

In many spoken languages around the world – but especially in British English – it is easy for the listener to understand the speaker's attitude: boredom, interest, surprise, anger, appreciation, happiness, and so on, are often evident in their intonation.

For instance, a server at a restaurant asks 'How's the chocolate muffin, madam?' and you reply 'mMMmmmm' with the intonation rising in the middle and falling towards the end. The server nods with a smile. Why? Because you have just expressed your appreciation for the item through the music of your voice – and without so much as a single (ordinarily meaningful) word.

Another instance of a different type would be your intonation on receiving a surprise birthday cake at your work. 'Did you get that for me?' you might say – your rising intonation, particularly on 'me' at the end, expressing surprise and delight.

The feeling of boredom or indifference, on the other hand, might be expressed with a flat tone, (think of a robot). Compare the 'thank you' uttered to the mailman delivering a utility bill

(flat) and the 'thank you!' said when someone helps you mend a flat tyre on the side of a road (expressive, heartfelt).

We often express gratitude and other emotions as much by our use of intonation as by the use of specific words.

Grammatical

There are some intonation patterns in English, which, for the most part, correspond to the use of particular grammar structures. The most common example is in the use of **wh-questions** (questions beginning with 'who', 'what', 'why', 'where', 'when', 'which', and 'how'), which usually have a falling intonation.

In a conversation with a new classmate, the following questions would sound most natural with falling intonation: 'What's your name?', 'Where are you from?', 'Why did you choose this school?', 'How long will you study here?'.

Questions that require a 'yes' or 'no' answer, however, usually have upward intonation. In the same conversation with your classmate, your voice would rise at the end when asking the following questions: 'Have you studied here before?', 'Do you like the teacher?', 'Will you come back tomorrow?'.

Ways to improve your intonation

The best way to improve your intonation is simply to become more aware of it. By listening carefully to a recorded conversation (YouTube is a good place to start), you will begin **noticing** how other speakers use intonation to express themselves.

Another idea is to record your own voice. These days, even the simplest mobile phones are equipped with a voice recorder. It is always fascinating (though sometimes unbearable) to listen to one's own voice because it sounds so different to what we expect! Try recording a dialogue with a friend, (you could use a script from a course book or scene from a film). Now listen to your intonation. Does it sound natural? Does it express your attitude in the way you hoped?

With a recording, you can always rewind, listen again and try a new version. Recordings are an excellent way to keep track of your progress. They clearly show how you have improved over time.

You are probably using intonation correctly a lot of the time

As we have seen, intonation is an important aspect of pronunciation, but it is worth remembering that you are probably using it correctly much of the time. Even if your intonation sounds robotic, like the cab driver we met earlier, it is unlikely to be causing a breakdown in communication.

But if you want to be more confident about your intonation in English, and especially if you want to use it with precision and subtlety, then it is certainly worth spending time noticing how others use it, imitating their use, and listening to a recording of your own voice.